

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
KHMER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT II**

INFORMANT: KAK KORNG [CAMBODIA]

INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI

TRANSLATOR: UNKNOWN MALE

DATE: APRIL 3, 2006

A = ALI

T = TRANSLATOR

C = COURTNEY

TCK = COURTNEY TRANSLATING FOR HER FATHER KAK

TCS = COURTNEY TRANSLATING FOR HER SISTER UNNAMED

Tape 06.01a

Note: “T” will be used to denote Translator’s voice, translating the questions asked of and the responses from the informant.

This interview is being translated by a third party. The male translator is unidentified. “K” will be used whenever he translates for Kak. At some point Kak’s daughter Courtney begins to translate. Kak’s other daughter, Courtney’s sister, also speaks and Courtney translates for her as well.

A: This is interview with Kak Korng, April 3, 2006. And thank you for welcoming us to your home today. First a little bit of background information, where and when were our born?

T: He was born in Kampot Province. He’s born 1923. He should be 82, 83 years old now?

A: So July 3, 1923 in Takeo?

T: In Kampot. (A: Kampot) Kampot Province.

A: What’s the name of the village? What town?

T: Ba Phnum.

A: Ba Phnum?

T: Ba Phnum.

T: Yah, the town.

A: The hill of the father?

T: Yah, yah. The village called the [Balay/Baray]. [Balay/Baray] Village.

A: And tell us, did you go to school there?

T: Went to school there, but didn't really get a very long education there because of large family members there. Also it's the outskirts of the town. Total nine members of the family.

A: Okay. Okay. What did your parents do for work?

T: Both of them farmers.

A: Okay. And what were your parents' names?

T: Pong Kong, Niek Cheak.

A: And were your parents born in that same area?

T: The same, the same village.

A: Same. Do you remember your grandparents?

T: Don't know the last name, but the first name Neang and Mong, the grandparents.

A: Okay. Could you write those down? And is that your, his father's parents, or his mother's?

T: Grandparents.

A: Those are his father's parents?

T: Father, yah.

A: And what about the maternal grandparents?

T: Don't remember the names.

A: Okay. And do you know where those people were born?

T: The same village.

A: Same place? Okay. What was your first employment?

T: Farmers.

A: Farmers, okay. What do you remember from your youth? Any special stories?

T: During the Sihanouk time was not very much of any issue, or anything happened during that time, because that was in the very late, late 1950 or so, until, until the two older kids was born. And after that then the country kind of fall apart and more stories happening.

A: Do you remember anything during World War II when the Japanese came?

T: His, one of his brothers was with the Japanese soldiers, and fight against the French (A: Really?) during that time.

A: And why was he fighting against the French? Did he think it would lead to independence?

T: Okay, I mistranslated. He was, his brother was in French soldiers, (A: Okay) not Japanese soldier, and fight against Japan. So I misunderstand that.

A: Okay. Okay.

T: The other, kind of other story they fight back and forth with the French and Japan soldiers during that time, but he was not involved in it, just his brother.

A: Okay. What was his brother's name?

T: [It Jeam]

T: Maybe like that, [It Jeam]?

A: Okay. Now were you involved in any political parties, like during, after the war, after World War II?

T: Never been.

A: And when did he start realizing that there was political things happening in the country that might affect him?

T: During the early 1940, there's a group called [Isirat], (A: Umhm) before the Communists. And then [Isirat I, Isirat II]. [Isirat II] are the one who fought against [unclear] French Revolution. That lead to (--) One of the leader, Isirat leader, was a guy names Samuth, Samuth something. I forgot his name.

A: Samuth, S A M U T H?

T: Yah, Samuth, Samuth something. And then this [Isirat] was the political front against, against Sihanouk, the won who run against Sihanouk 1955. (T: if I'm not mistaken. I studied that) (A: Okay) 1955, but those political was not really a war until the Communists Regime. Then [unclear] when [Isirat] become the Khmer Rouge.

A: Okay.

T: One day then when they oversee, kind of you know, oversee the [country], Lon Nol took over. Then the war started.

A: Okay. And when Lon Nol took over, did the war affect you and your family?

T: It's not really directly affects like lifestyle, but just do preparation for kind of (--) The war is not there, but kind of aware of what's going on?

A: Okay.

T: Three of his cousins joined the Lon Nol army, all were killed. Then they, they kind of [give them rank], Star I, Star II, and then all of them were killed.

A: Okay. Let's see, where were you when the Khmer Rouge took control of the country?

T: The same province.

A: Okay. And what did you think when they took control?

T: Become a teacher?

A: Oh okay. Okay. So you changed your occupation.

T: Medical Profession.

A: Okay. So let's back up a little bit. So when did you quit farming?

T: He stopped. He kind of doing both since he was twenty-five years old as [medicinal divisional] medicines, and his father was really knowledgeable on that. So he's been, he kept doing that since he was twenty-five until now.

A: Okay. So your father taught you the traditional medicine?

T: Yah, he's the one who [unclear].

A: So tell us about that. What was the first thing that you learned about medicine.

T: Just general practice, including labor.

A: For child birth?

T: Child birth. Including too those infections like [birth], not [birth mark], but infections, chicken pocks, and some mental illness as well, as well too.

A: Okay. So could you describe one of the medical, not procedures, but diagnosis for (--)
) What would he do if somebody was sick with chicken pocks for example?

T: You want to know the medicines? (A: Yah) They're kind of difficult to describe, because some are herbs that he kind of used altogether for the chicken pocks.

A: Would he get these herbs from right around the area, or did he have to go somewhere to get them?

T: Yah, surrounding area, and then, and mixed himself.

A: And was some of the herbs harder to find than other ones? And if so, which ones?

T: It's not that difficult to find.

[Courtney walks in the room and says hello]

T: There's some medicine that he mixed for someone. That's the medicine that they mixed for this herbs.

A: Okay. These are all different ones?

T: That's for the, can be a lot of things including [numb], they good for [numb], movement, stuff like that.

A: I'm sorry, what is that?

T: Some of them is relating to somebody is numb, like your body is not feeling numb, or not movement [unclear], or stroke. Not to the point of stroke, but some of that. (A: Okay) For swollen leg and all that.

A: Could be just ask him like to describe one, and maybe in detail what's [unclear]. Take a picture of that.

T: That's one for (--)

[Someone sneezes]

A: Bless you. (T: Swelling) For swelling?

T: And for the numb leg.

A: Okay. And what is that made out of?

T: [Names the herbs in Khmer]

A: So those are all the names of all the herbs? Okay, we'll get those translated.

T: That's for the, for labor.

A: For labor? And what would you do with this powder here?

T: That's for, you put in, you put that in, in white wine. You put that in white wine.

A: So you mix this powder in white wine and give it to the woman?

T: Yah, it's for drinking white wine, with the white wine.

A: Okay. And what is that one right there?

T: Oh, that's for the woman who had difficulty for birth. [Unclear]

A: Could we get, is there a name for each one of the medicines? A single name?

T: [Unclear].

A: Okay. So actually do this one first. This one first, this one second, and this one third.

C: I'm sick.

T: That's why you had to [take the medicine]. [Both laugh]

A: So ask him the names of one, two, three.

T: You know how the right name is? [Unclear], you read it? (A: Okay) Okay?

A: Okay, I'm going to pause for a moment. Okay, this is the second powder?

T: The rice, the wet rice (A: Yah). Rice that is wet, but it's sweet. (A: Okay) So that's what it is.

A: And what about the first one? What does that translate as? What does that mean? Is there any English translation of that?

[Conversation between Courtney and translator discussing why they call medicine by a name meaning "superior being"]

T: But whatever that, I cannot translate it.

A: Okay. How about the third one?

T: Third one, let's see. I can't read it.

T: [Kha Khan]

A: Kha? Flower?

T: Yah.

A: [Khan]? So what does [Kha Khan] mean?

T: [Khan] means moon.

A: Okay. Okay.

T: [Kha] means flower. Flower moon.

A: Okay. All right. Let's keep going with these, because I think this is very interesting. Okay, so this is the fourth one.

T: This is, smell it. You know, have you ever eaten Indian food?

A: Like curry.

T: Yah, you put in curry, but this is for medicine.

A: Really? So is it curry? It's a kind of curry?

T: No.

A: Okay, so what's the name of this one?

T: There's a lot of mixing. There's some black pepper mixed with other stuff.

A: Okay. This one right here?

T: That one right there.

A: Okay. So we just took a picture of the outside. Let's take a picture of the inside. Have him hold that one. Okay. And what is that used for?

T: Mix with fever and the numb, numbness.

A: And what's this one over here now?

T: [Unclear]. There's two different kinds. That's another different kind.

T: One is for [unclear], another one for [unclear], smell. The tree is called [Klemchen]. That's one of the famous trees. They take out the skin.

A: The bark? Take off the bark?

T: Yes.

A: Okay, we're going to pause. Okay, so this is bark from the tree? And what kind of tree is this?

T: That's the (A: The moon tree?) moon tree. The moon tree.

A: Oh wow, smells great. Can I smell that again? So you bought that where? In New York City?

T: He went to Cambodia to get it.

A: Oh wow.

T: This is the one he can get it, when he get it. He had this paper, gave him permission to get all of this stuff.

A: Okay. Okay. So tell him we're going to come back and document some more of the medicines.

T: Traditional medicine, [unclear] and holding cameras, Khao-I-Dang.

A: Yah. Can we borrow these and make copies of that?

T: He has a copy to give you.

C: He said he can give it to you the next time you come here.

A: Sure, sure. That's great. (C: I can translate) Okay. Oh wow! Okay, yah, we can make copies of these. That's great. So tell him we'll come back and talk more about the medicine.

T: Okay.

A: We'll try to work on finishing up his personal story right now.

T: Okay.

A: So what did you think about when (--) I should (--) Hold up. I'm sorry. So back to the medicine a little bit. Did he go to any formal school for the medicine?

T: He never [practiced] that. He's not formal school.

A: And how did your father learn about medicine?

T: He, his father grew up in a jungle for sixteen years just to learn that medicine.

A: Really?

T: This form, formal kind of education medications in the jungle, when someone who become a monk want to learn more about what he need to learn, they go to deep, deep forest, deep jungle and learn all this kind of things. His father stayed there for sixteen years.

A: As a monk?

T: He stayed sixteen years like a monk in there. And then afterward he left the jungle to come like the outside to the civilize world just to watch his grandfather who was very sick. That's why he got out. He know almost every tree.

A: Wow. And where, which jungle was this, in that same province?

T: Along, along Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Speu Province. That's in there.

A: Okay, great. How long, what year did your father die?

T: Around 1970.

A: Okay. And so you learned from the age of 25 until your father passed away?

T: He learned a lot of practicing with his father since he was really young.

A: Before he was twenty-five?

T: He start working since he was twenty-one.

A: Twenty-one. Okay.

T: This is like generation. He know from his father. Try to know through him, and taught him, and then he become the master of later on. His great-grandfather know the Chinese medicine. (A: Ah huh) So he can understand Chinese medicine. So that mean like a hundred years ago already. (A: Yah) So he talked about that.

Tape I, side A ends
Tape I, side B begins

A: All right. Um, I'm sorry. I don't even know where we left off. So could we recover some of the things real quickly? Maybe about the time when the Khmer Rouge took over. Maybe you could just relay what he already said, if you can remember. They brought in people from how many provinces to learn from him?

C: They brought in people from eleven provinces to learn from him. (A: Okay) And he felt like he was going to die shortly after that, after they, he figures these people, he think that they, they were going to kill him.

A: And replace him?

C: And replace him. So they also killed his siblings who were serving in the military. And right after that they sent in the students to learn from him. But during that time that was when the Vietnamese invaded, and they would, I guess like they were busy fighting the Khmer Rouge. So he used that opportunity to escape.

A: Okay. And he left in January of '79.

C: Yes, he left in January of '79.

A: And they also killed some of his brothers-in-law?

C: Ah, yes, they killed his in-laws, and they also killed his father.

A: Okay. How many, how many of his family members died?

C: Um, five. Including in-laws?

A: First his immediate family.

T: He said from his siblings on his, the girls all alive. He said but all the boys were killed.

A: How many boys? Five?

T: Wow, nine. Okay, he's also counting in-laws and nephews. Yah, but they were in the military.

A: Okay. Can he, can he give us the names of his brothers first that were killed?

T: All his siblings are girls. He was talking about his in-laws and nephews, yah.

A: Okay. Okay. All right. Just to recap as well, he learned the medicine from his father. And could you tell the story about what his father did to learn about the medicine?

C: Could I tell it?

A: Or him, or [unclear].

T: He was actually just giving me a description of what his father (--)

A: Right. So ask him about the time his father went to the jungle. Where was that, and how many years? Tell him I apologize. We lost some of the tape.

T: He say his father went into like forest to learn like from about twenty-one and stayed for sixteen years. He got out like when he was thirty-six.

A: And he got out because?

T: Oh, because his great, at that time his great grand (--)

A: His father.

T: His father's father was very sick, and they were, they put him in the hospital. And put, even like put him in chains.

A: Because of his mental illness?

T: Yah, mental illness and he was aggressive towards people. Yes.

A: So when his father came out of the jungle did he take his father out of the hospital?

T: Okay, he said that the grandfather, his grandfather wasn't in the hospital. He was just in town, but he was kind of acting crazy. So people like put him in chains. Yah, put him in chains.

A: And when his father came out of the jungle, did he take him out of the chains and bring him home?

T: Yah.

A: And again ask him where was the jungle?

T: He said from Kampot to (A: Kampong Speu), Kampong Speu to (A: Battambang) Battambang. Yah, like all that region.

A: Okay. So who did he leave when he left Cambodia to escape, who did he go with?

C: I think he said earlier during that time he was separated from his family.

A: Okay.

C: So he just kind of ran by himself.

A: And how long did it take him to get to Thailand?

C: She said six months.

T: He said that he was lost in the woods for six months before he made it into Thailand. He, only he. He said, you know, like just cooking the leaves and stuff. There's no [salt], nothing. No rice either.

A: Wow, did you get skinny?

T: Oh, he said he had like one, you know that thing when you heat up water, he had one and he used it to heat up. That's what he used to cook I think. He said he just take like leaves and wood barks and cook, because he actually knows which tree you can eat from.

A: So if, if he didn't know the medicine would he have survived?

T: He said no, he probably wouldn't.

A: And did you see any other people in that, during that time?

T: He said, yah, a lot, hundred thousands.

A: Of people?

T: Yes. He said like a bunch, like thousands died, like three, four thousand dying, yah, in the forest.

A: So he was with a bunch of people?

T: Yah, he said he was with them. He said some of them were just sitting there like flies, all covered with flies, and they're still alive, still breathing, but they're, but they're like

covered with insects. He said children this tall, there's so many of them dead. Like you can see like piles of them dead.

A: And from starvation?

T: Yah, from starvation.

A: Um, did you help people find the right trees and leaves to eat?

T: Oh, he said that those woods, those ah, some of them like if children ingest them they would vomit and die. He said that with kids you can only help them by finding tomato, or food, but he couldn't find any of those. And like the wood bark and things like that, you have, you can't eat them if you're a child like, they make you die or something.

A: Wow. How about, and did they find any animals and eat any animals?

T: He said you can't find any animals. There's just people, but no animal.

A: Wow.

T: Yah. He said like people, they're floating dead bodies on the stream, river stream. There's like a bunch, just dead bodies floating. And some of the people die, jump in the river and die, because they panic when they hear, "Oh, there's some Vietnamese coming, Vietnamese coming." It makes them scared so they jump in the river, and they drown and die. Yah.

A: How about Khmer [Kahong]?

T: Actually they were running too during that time. They were fleeing too.

A: So were the people mixed in together?

T: He said everybody was mixed in together, and ran together.

A: And did he lose weight during that time?

T: He said he had to clutch on to the tree just to be able to stand up, or something. He said no, he's so skinny, he has nothing to wear. He only has this one pant [khaki], and one water boiler, oh yah. [Chuckles]

A: Wow.

T: He said he eats anything, insects, whatever. You know, like stuff that crawl over you, insects. Like you have nothing else to eat. Six months.

A: Six months. And so how did you find your way to Thailand?

T: He said there was this little kid, he doesn't know where the kid came from, but the kid showed him the way to Thailand.

A: Really?

T: Yah.

A: And when the kid (--)

T: He said like the kid looked like [unclear], like a guide, little boy about twelve years old. (A: Okay) Not little, [unclear]. He cut the wood, put on his and tell him (--) Okay, so as he was walking he just, every tree he passed he'd break a bark, a piece of it so that (A: Break a branch?) yah, leaving a trail for people to follow.

A: The boy did that?

T: Yah, he says a boy did that. He said he doesn't know the kid. Don't know where he came from. Don't know anything about him. He said every morning he comes back to lead them.

A: Oh, so he would take a group, he would find people?

T: He says every night the kid just disappeared, and he'd come back in the morning. He has nothing on him, that little kid.

A: No clothing?

T: Black garment and a [unclear], you know, like a scarf (A: like a scarf) and a knife. That's what he had.

A: And was he Cambodian or Thai?

T: He said he speak Khmer. The kid speak Khmer.

A: Was he Cambodian though?

T: Okay. So he said that once they got to Thailand, the, up to the Thai, I think border, and the little kid tell him this is, this is it, he said that the kid disappeared right after that. The kid just took off. He said that the kid just disappeared right in front of them. Like a puff of air. Yah, and he said everybody wanted to know more about the kid, but there was nothing to know. He said that I can only take you this far, and then he disappeared. He say he doesn't [laughing-cannot comprehend a few words] ghost [unclear].

A: No, no.

T: So like he said yes, the kid just disappeared. He said I can only take you this far, and then he was gone after that.

A: And so did he believe they were a ghost?

C: He think he's, I don't know how to say it in English. Actually there's an ex (A: Go ahead), there's an expression in Khmer that they used to describe certain people, that it's part of the culture with certain I think powers and things like that. He thinks you have to be like a really, really good person, like really honest, like very high principles. And because of these high virtues, high ethics, it enables you to have like protection from spirits. It's just a Khmer culture, and my dad believed that the kid was like a symbol, like some kind of, I don't know, like one of those people.

A: And what's the Khmer word for that? What Khmer phrase?

T: [Says phrase in Khmer]

A: And so this boy helped a lot of groups go out of Cambodia?

T: He said like the people who walked with him like maybe two thousand that followed the boy.

A: Really?

T: Umhm.

A: And so only one time he went and got the people?

T: He doesn't know if the boy went back to help more people or not.

A: So that when the boy first came, how long between the time when he showed up to talk to everybody, how long was the walk to the border?

T: He said he got lost and all he sees are pile of elephant dung. And then the kid (--)

A: Who? Who got lost?

T: He said he was lost for three days. All he sees what elephant dung. After three days he saw the boy. Okay, so he said if you go this way it will take you to Thailand in three days. But if you go this way you will die. You have to go this other way, which will also take three days. Oh, no, no. He said three days but you will die. This one, seven days. The other way he's saying was seven days. Never mind, I got it mixed up. The seven days one, that boy say if you use that route you will die. You use the three-day route one. Okay, he said they passed a river stream, like taking a drink.

A: Did the boy take them, or he just told him to go follow the route of the trees that had broken branches?

C: I think, wait, I'll just check with him.

T: Yah, he said he walked first and he break the bark as he is walking.

A: Oh, he broke the bark. Did he use his knife to cut the bark?

T: He said he used both. He used sometimes hand, sometime that nothing he's holding.

A: Okay, and I'm sorry. So the boy actually took the people on the seven day journey?

T: So when the boy took everyone, he waited for everyone within the vicinity like, the vicinity that he can see. Like he waited until everyone like that was still alive, you know, like gathered, come together before he like walked. [Unclear]

A: He, he actually led everybody there, right?

T: Yah. Yah.

A: Okay. Wow, that's an interesting story. So you got to Thailand? What happened then?

T: Then when he got to Thailand they you know, shoot, were shooting at them, and robbing them. Yah.

A: And so how did he escape that?

[Tape skips]

T: This guy, when he got to Thailand, helped him. (A: Okay) Help like, help keep them alive.

A: Really, and he was what, [Brahn]? [Very loud screeching sound]

T: He said that he can speak Khmer, can read/write Khmer fluently.

A: Was he [Brahn]?

T: He said that he's an American in Texas.

A: And how did he learn Cambodian?

T: He used to be [unclear], which I think means amnesty in Cambodia during the Sihanouk era.

A: Oh okay.

T: Yah, he helped, he helped saved their lives because the Thai was killing them too.

A: Really?

T: Yah, like the Thai was like trying to kill the Cambodians coming into the border, but he helped them.

A: How did he, how did he help them? How did he stop the killing?

T: Oh, he said that he had like, he said that he had the U.N. people with him, and things like that.

A: Okay. (T: Yah) And when they first went in, were there many Cambodians already there, or were you, were you guys some of the first people?

T: He said like one of the first people, one of the first group of people.

A: And so where, where did they go then?

T: They took him to (--)

C: My sister kind of pointed out that he skipped a few incidents.

A: Okay.

T: And he said, he said he doesn't want to make the story long.

A: No, no, that's fine. That's why we're here. You have an interesting life.

T: Okay, when they first come they got to Mairut, [Kronghai]. I think those are just (--)
The border of Koh Kong and Thailand. The border.

A: Oh Koh Kong and Thailand?

T: And the Thai told them, go back to your country. Yah. He said when they went back to the forest another group of people died. Like a lot of people.

A: Really?

T: Yah.

A: So after the boy had lead them there, they had to go back into the forest?

T: Yah, even though they got there they had to go back, and like a group of people died. He said during that time more people died than what, than when they came out of the forest the first time. Yah, because they were just so exhausted by then. He said that when they were able to run off the second time, they got to [Bung Beng], and that's when the United Nations were involved. He said, because that time the U.N. were there. That's why they, they tried to help the people. Yah.

A: Why does he think the Thai people turned them back?

[Short discussion on relating small sections of story at a time to make it easier for translator to remember what to repeat when translating.]

S: From what I remember what she said was, like they got to that region, and at first they had nothing to eat. They don't you know, they were just there. And then the Thai people said something (--) When they came down the mountain trail with the Thai, they checked people's things to make sure they don't have weapons, and to remove the weapons. And then they told them, they told them to go into this [unclear]. They took the people and put them by this area called [unclear]. It's like near a river. Like near a beach, sea, beach sea, yah, something like that. She said during that time they had nothing to eat. And they didn't, you know, they obviously didn't give us anything to eat either.

A: Okay.